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Israel: Controversy Over New President

Pressure is building within the Likud Party against Prime Minister Begin's choice of a political unknown, Egyptian-born nuclear physicist Yitzhak Chavet, to succeed Ephraim Katzir as Israel's next president. Most in the Liberal wing of the party support the candidacy of their retired chairman, Elimelekh Rimalt. The Liberals, along with a growing number in Begin's Herut faction, want Chavet to withdraw and spare Begin and the party the embarrassment of a divisive internal squabble.

Faced with the Liberals' opposition, Begin has decided to postpone a final decision on a candidate until his return from the United States. He will have to resolve the matter quickly because the Knesset is scheduled to elect a new president early next month. The president's office is largely ceremonial; his most important function is delegating authority to the representative of the largest party in the Knesset to form a new government.

Katzir announced last December that he had decided not to seek reelection. Begin subsequently expressed his desire that the next president come from the disadvantaged community of Sephardic Israelis who immigrated mainly from North Africa and eastern Arab states--a key Herut constituency. He recently nominated Chavet despite the Liberals' support for the Polish-born Rimalt. Some Liberals have claimed that in doing so Begin reneged on an earlier promise to support a Liberal candidate in return for Liberal backing in the election of a Herut figure as Knesset speaker.

Rimalt's popularity appears to extend beyond Liberal circles. Yitzhak Navon, a Labor Party Knesset deputy who unsuccessfully sought the presidency five years ago, has spoken out publicly in favor of Rimalt's candidacy. Navon, although born in Israel, is a

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Sephardic descendant and his credentials as a political moderate won him support not only in his own party but even among some in the Begin coalition.

Navon's endorsement thus is likely to throw significant support to Rimalt and pose a challenge to Begin if he chooses to stick by Chavet. Navon has not ruled out his own candidacy; he might be amenable to a draft should an impasse be reached over the other candidates.

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